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From *Herland* to *The Handmaid's Tale*: The Complicity of Women in Oppression

Charlotte Perkins Gilman's early twentieth century writing and speeches have long been regarded as feminist texts. They were held up in both the first and second waves of feminism as patriarchally subversive and politically and socially progressive. One of her more obscure pieces, *Herland* (1915), was recovered in 1979, where it met with feminist critical acclaim. Not long thereafter, however, post-structuralist theory of feminism of the 1980s and 1990s brought forth previously absent critiques of Gilman's works (Weinbaum 286). Alys Weinbaum notes that scholars who recovered her writing during second wave feminism had been silent on the ways in which her progressive rhetoric also blatantly espoused racism and eugenicist ideals. The utopian novella and its sequel, *With Her in Ourland* (1916), draw upon language of extermination and/or reproductive control of women who are considered unfit for reproduction. Within the texts, there is disregard for the exploitation of the body of some women to benefit others.

The 1980s was also the decade in which Margaret Atwood published her novel *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985). This novel, too, has been met with criticism of its handling of hierarchical notions of race and class. Atwood's novel is undeniably critical of some of the ideals that Gilman and her contemporaries espoused, such as the idea that women draw inherent power from their bodies as the maintainers of the "purity" of the populace of the nation-state. But in significant ways, Atwood's dystopian novel also allows for the appropriation of racial and classist oppression by the white female reader. The 2017 television adaptation, though situated in a post-millennial era dystopian future, allows for the same appropriation from today's viewers.

I seek to explore what affective response each of these three texts invokes. For example, why has the contemporary iteration of *The Handmaid's Tale* gained such popularity despite the obvious problematic handling of race and class? Each allows for the women in them (and the readers of them) to simultaneously assume the roles of victim and savior. In *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*, the white protagonists are threatened—victimized—by the idea that women of lower socioeconomic class or women of color threaten to degenerate the “pure” white bloodline that they are keen on preserving. The Progressive Era readers were victimized by the oppressive patriarchal system under which they lived. But the novellas allow space for the women within them as well as the women reading them to assume the role of savior in that they have devised a system which allows for the proliferation of the “fit” race and the demise of the “unfit” through the practice of eugenics. Their white feminine bodies, in other words, gain power in their policing of the purity of the nation-state, at the expense of the bodies of other women. Similarly, *The Handmaid's Tale* (both the novel and its television adaptation) are feminist texts of sorts. That said, they both also allow the white middle class heteronormative woman at the center of the plot to become at once a victim and a savior. In *The Handmaid's Tale*, however, her victimhood causes her to experience the affect of oppression, which leads to an awakening and a solidarity between herself and her fellow handmaids. And those who read the novel or view the television show can situate themselves as a reflection of this “wokeness.” All three texts, over the span of roughly 100 years, offer a whitewashed version of feminism that allows white, middle and upper class women to be both victims and saviors, while simultaneously suppressing the racist and eugenicist dimensions of reproductive discourse therein. And in each text, white women are the ones who most directly hold up the patriarchal and oppressive standard of the dystopian societies in which they exist.

The Progressive Movement and Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* and *With Her in Ourland*

Gilman's novella *Herland* was originally published in 1915 in serial form in her journal *The Forerunner*. The novella is about an Amazonian island full of women of “Aryan stock” who reproduce through

parthenogenesis. The story is framed as an anthropological observation of the women by three male American scientists who discover the island. The men (Terry, Jeff, and Van) enter the island with preconceived notions about how an all-female island must look. They are quite surprised when they find that the women have created a self-sustaining, clean, progressive environment without any assistance from men. The problem, however, is that rather than maintaining its initial utopic vision and accompanying subversion of patriarchy, *Herland* morphs into dystopian gloominess because the women of the island subscribe to the idea of population control. Through coercive rhetoric, the women employ negative eugenics to control their population, and they (and the white, heteronormative male narrator) sing the praises of those women who make the “sacrifice” of shunning reproduction for the “greater good” of the community. At its time of publication, the dystopian eugenic tone of the novella was not challenged by critics. In fact, according to Joanne Karpinski, *The Forerunner* was not reviewed by scholarly journals (5). Gilman was a popular lecturer on the public circuit, and her speeches were popular in newspapers. But her writing in *The Forerunner* was not widely discussed until decades later when it was rediscovered during second wave feminism.

As Dorothy Roberts notes in her book *Killing the Black Body*, the idea that the female body could lead to social and racial progress about which Gilman wrote extensively was not unusual during the early twentieth century (59). In fact, many of these early feminists harnessed the ideals of the eugenics movement in order to advance their own agendas. Eugenicist theory was in part response to the early twentieth century anxiety over “race suicide” and the fear of overpopulation of the Other (specifically, at the time, immigrants, African Americans, and the “feeble-minded”). Kristen Egan explains that this fear was due in part to the changes brought forth by industrialization. She notes that “mass immigration, the great migration of African Americans into cities, urbanization, and industrialization generated anxiety over an evolving American identity, resulting in a nativist impulse to maintain an insular national identity” (81). Because of these shifts in the social landscape, the worries over the reproduction of the “pure” white race increased. Even Theodore Roosevelt called for “native” Americans (by which he meant white people, not indigenous Americans) to

“bear more children for the good of the nation” (Roberts 61). It is not surprising, then, that the eugenics movement and its focus on population control of the bounded nation-state became entangled with the notions of childbirth and the reproductive power of the bodies of white women.

Indeed, as Asha Nadkarni puts it, “It is through feminist investments in nationalism (which...work according to a racialized reproductive mechanism) that feminism becomes dangerously tied to eugenicist thinking” (8). In other words, the reproduction and cultivation of more white bodies creates a “purified” nation-state while simultaneously giving white women the hierarchical standing of power that comes with “rescuing” the nation from its perceived national crisis of race suicide. The control of the female body was the popular proposed solution to the fear surrounding population concerns. At issue was the fact that the women of higher societal standing exploited those of lower standing in order to maintain their respective hierarchical positions. For example, Margaret Sanger, known as one of the earliest proponents of birth control, used eugenics in order to advance white feminism. Roberts explains that “Eugenics gave the birth control movement a national mission and the authority of a reputable science. By framing her campaign in eugenic terms, Sanger could demonstrate that birth control served the nation’s interests” (73). The progressive notions of birth control became a means of achieving “racial betterment.” These activists utilized the frame of cultivation to support the idea of noble motherhood, that the good of the society rested upon the shoulders—or quite literally, within the wombs—of white women.

Dana Seitler argues that Gilman also “uses eugenics for a feminist agenda articulated on behalf of current social problems—further demonstrating how feminism and eugenics during this time period were not only compatible but were mutually constitutive, each inextricably rooted in the constitution of the other” (64). And we see this relationship illustrated in Gilman’s *Herland*. The narrator, Van, describes the moment in which the women discovered their ability to reproduce through parthenogenesis, which correlates the power of reproduction through the body of women and the power of the state: “Here at last was Motherhood, and though it was not for all of them personally, it might—if the power was inherited—found here a new race”

(Gilman 58). By scrapping all men from the island, Gilman underscores the value of motherhood and places the emphasis on the women as the creators, the makers, the saviors. They are able to “save” their population through creating more “pure” children. Nevertheless, the narrator also stresses the point that motherhood was “not for all of them personally.” In one statement, Gilman lays the groundwork for the idea of the appropriation and control of the bodies of those women for whom motherhood was “not for.” The women who reproduce for the good of the population, then, are the saviors. If this sounds overly didactic, Shelly Fishkin argues that the didacticism is deliberate. She argues that Gilman quite knowingly combined imagination and heavy-handed “logic” to persuade the female readers of *The Forerunner* to take part in her ideas of social betterment. The framing of the novellas (and the fact that they were serialized, entertaining fiction meant for white progressive women) and their printing in *The Forerunner* created a guidebook within a guidebook. American women reading these stories were meant to take the lessons within and apply them to their own lives; from the stories, they could learn to harness the power to cultivate the societies Gilman assumed they, like she, desired. And they could do this at once, even at the expense of those women of “lower sort.”

As Mary Jo Deegan notes in the introduction to the 1997 edition of *With Her in Ourland, Herland* should be situated next to its sequel, which was published serially throughout 1916 (3). The sequel contextualizes Gilman’s overt didacticism with regard to female reproductive responsibilities. While *Herland* is didactic, Gilman is even more heavy-handed in its sequel with regard to the importance of female responsibilities surrounding conception, birth, and child-rearing. By the end of *Herland*, the narrator Van has married a Herlander of “higher sort” named Ellador. In *With Her in Ourland*, the two embark upon a journey around the world so that Ellador can conduct her own anthropological experiment by living with and learning about various countries and peoples. She and Van plan to take her findings back to Herland to advance Herlander understanding of cultures outside of their own. Right away, Ellador is disgusted and saddened by the conditions she finds within other countries. Confronted with the “suicidal crowding” on earth, she asks

Van, “...why do not the women limit the population, as we did” (Gilman 100)? For Ellador, the logical way to keep countries and their inhabitants thriving is to control the population. And the way to control the population is to control the reproductive bodies of women, since the men in Ourland are incapable of abstaining. Indeed, Van replies, “Oh Ellador, Ellador—you cannot seem to realize that this world is not a woman’s world...This is a man’s world—and they do not want to limit the population” (100). Here, women are given the sole responsibility for the maintenance of the purity of the populace, which inherently means that women are meant to control other women. At once, Gilman’s didacticism, shown through the diagnoses of Ellador, is both subversive of the patriarchy in the assumption that men will not contribute to the effort of betterment and oppressive of women who are considered to be of impure blood or of slowly-evolving cultures. Ellador argues that it is up to the women to “make the best kind of people...and keep them at their best and growing better...” (181).

Herland is told through a mode of scientific observation through the male gaze. The three men who arrive on the island are scientists, and the reader finds out right away that Van’s tale is meant for anthropological consideration when he notes that the world should learn from the success of Herland (3). As Andrew Christensen notes, the novella is also an “experiment” in a meta sense in that it is designed “to ‘test’ the range of female capability against contemporary gender stereotypes” (288). Indeed, the Herlanders have made many progressive scientific advancements in order to maintain their “utopian” environment. But the very framing of the novella itself underscores the idea that women are those who do the work of upholding the patriarchal system. The men, through Van’s scientific, male voice, usurp the voices of the women, even though the women are those who are carrying out their lives in Herland. This framing demonstrates the idea that men maintain the highest level of societal structure but that this placement is bolstered by the (in)action of women.

In *With Her in Ourland*, Van remains the narrator, but Ellador takes on the role of scientific observer. It is significant, then, that Ellador offers the outsider point of view of which Van, a male American, is

incapable. Indeed, she is often referred to as an outsider throughout the novella, and her outsider status gives her inherent power. She is likened to an angel, an alien, an outsider, and a savior. Take for example, Van's comments on her Otherness: "You are the most important ambassador that ever was...You are sent from your upland island, your little hidden heaven, to see our poor blind bleeding world..." (Gilman 76). Ellador's position as savior-observer is interesting in that she assumes the role of "alien," which during Gilman's time was a term used for unwanted immigrants. With this rhetoric surrounding the notion of immigration and the impurities caused by it, it is interesting that Ellador, the alien, is considered "pure" and capable of diagnosing problems within the United States. In fact, her outsider status is a positive attribute—a position of power—rather than another potential for the infiltration of the "impure" immigrant blood into the country. If Ellador was not of "Aryan stock," her alien status would not be placed upon such a pedestal; instead, her body would add to the number of immigrant bodies that Gilman believed overran American cities and borders. If not "Aryan," her body would be one that other women encouraged to abstain from childbearing. Lisa Long notes that "Ellador is uneasily linked to those immigrants through alien imagery, suggesting that her presence, too, will alter the shape of the national body..." (178-179). Though she is "uneasily linked," it is her whiteness, thinly disguised as her "well-ordered mind" that establishes both her purity and her authority. Because of her whiteness, too, she embodies the role of victim that comes with being threatened by the overpopulation of other races. And though she is an outsider, she is also considered savior.

Another means by which Ellador diagnoses and attempts to control the bodies of women is the use of observation. For example, the women in Herland have an almost omnipotent view over the entirety of their island. Within the country, there is a palpable and disconcerting sense of ever-present, panoptic observation. Van likens that watchfulness to the positive notion of clear communication between the Herlanders, but ultimately, the communication shows the power hierarchy of the women. The eyes of the women move from a sense of communal organization to an eerie sense of control. Observation is also the primary means of control in *With Her in Ourland*. Ellador's "real outsider's point of view" and her expertise

from her time in Herland places her in the role of both alien and doctor (Gilman 110). There is even a chapter entitled “The Diagnosis” in which she explains how to solve the problems of nation-wide crowding and maintenance of national cleanliness and purity (115). Observation gives Ellador power to diagnose. Van often describes the moments in which Ellador and he travel by airplane. Their bodies are literally positioned higher-up; they observe the ways in which those “beneath” them should be changed, fixed, or eradicated entirely. The positioning of their bodies as physically higher reflects the classist and racist hierarchical ideals of Gilman’s time.

But what is of particular interest in *Herland* are those that are *not* observed—namely, the body of the Other or those considered “unfit” for motherhood. In a close parallel to their treatment of “unfit” women, the Herlanders in power keep female cats that require male cats for procreation. Since the male cats are not mothers and are therefore less useful and respected in Herland, they are contained out of sight of the reader in “walled gardens and the houses of friends” (52). This of course raises questions of population control once again: if there are only a “few” male cats, what has happened to the others? Presumably, they have been killed or slowly bred out. Unsurprisingly, the control of bodies is brought forward from the bodies of the cats to the bodies of the women themselves. The women in Herland who are considered “unfit” or not useful are “bred out;” in short, the misfits are contained and done away with. The women cultivate the bodies they desire in order to suit their desires for “purity.” Similarly, Ellador violently describes the control of female bodies in *With Her in Ourland*. She likens the body of the country to the body of a sick child that requires cleaning. Ellador’s job on Herland is, perhaps unsurprisingly, that of forester, and so she uses metaphors of trees in order to argue her point: “When I see trees attacked by vermin, I exterminate the vermin if I can” (148). The purity of the country is likened to an innocent child, while the body of immigrants—which are relegated to the position of the non-human—must be “exterminated.” In order to reclaim the innocence of the “child,” the pure female body must maintain the populace, while the “vermin” bodies must abstain from procreation.

Egan explains that at roughly the same time as the rise of the eugenics movement in the early twentieth century, there was also a movement toward a focus on bodily cleanliness. Scientists realized that germs were microscopic and “agents of contagion” (78). Germ theory, Egan argues, caused an obsession with keeping one’s space clean, and this spread from the home environment to the cleanliness of body to the cleanliness of race. She states that “[eugenic achievement] goes hand in hand with environmental purification, exposing a symbiotic relationship between body and space...” (82). The borders of the body are blurred as the environment moves from without to within. In order to keep Herland clean, the women must remain isolated from other contaminated areas. For example, the women’s positioning away from the undesirable native men living nearby exemplifies this desire for controlled isolation (85). As Nadkarni puts it, *Herland* “must operate by exclusion precisely because its developmentalist vision depends upon describing itself in relation to some kind of less developed outside. Part of this is the repudiation of difference at *Herland*’s core; Gilman’s civilized Herlanders must both define themselves against and project outside their boundaries the very ‘savagery’ they overcame” (43-44). In other words, the placement of the “savage” people just outside the physical boundaries of their island allows the women to define themselves as civilized. Because the boundaries are protected, so are the boundaries of the literal bodies of the women. It is notable, then, that the men who infiltrate these boundaries—who the Herlanders *allow* to infiltrate these boundaries—are white.

The cultivation and perfection of the gardens within Herland is the clearest representation of the work’s focus on fertility and control of the female body. Upon arrival, Jeff describes his first view of the utopian landscape as “perfect” (Gilman 20). Van picks up his description: “Here was evidently a people highly skilled, efficient, caring for their country as a florist cares for his costliest orchids. Under the soft brilliant blue of that clear sky, in the pleasant shade of those endless rows of trees, we walked unharmed...” (20). While this scene is clearly utopic, it also demonstrates a semblance of control through its manicured rows of trees and perfect care that the women seemingly give the land. This desire for perfection and controlled land represents the way in which the women control life itself. Christensen notes that “...‘control

over nature' has a tendency to extend to 'control over man'—hence the scientific utopia as the basis for the modern dystopia" (297). Cultivation of the most desirable environment spreads to the cultivation of the most "desirable" people within.

More specifically, the fruit-bearing trees within Herland work as a metaphor for the female womb. Take, for example, Van's description:

I had never seen, had scarcely imagined, human beings undertaking such a work as the deliberate replanting of an entire forest area with different kinds of trees. Yet this seemed to them the simplest common sense, like a man's plowing up an inferior lawn and reseeding it. Now every tree bore fruit—edible fruit, that is. In the case of one tree, in which they took especial pride, it had originally no fruit at all—that is, none humanly edible—yet was so beautiful they wished to keep it. For nine hundred years they had experimented, and now showed us this particularly lovely graceful tree, with a profuse crop of nutritional seeds. (Gilman 80)

The implication here is that to make way for the preferred bodies to "bear fruit," the "inferior" must be done away with, or "plowed up." The lawns should be "reseeded"—a metaphor for the cultivation of racially pure bodies. Control of the environment's aesthetics and utility through fruit is representative of control of the bodies of women on the island and the "fruits" of their wombs. And so the use of negative eugenics that the women practice is literally naturalized through their commitment to control their natural environment. The women in power do not allow those women considered less "fit" to become mothers. Herlander Somel explains: "We have, of course, made it our first business to train out, to breed out, when possible, the lowest types...If the girl showing the bad qualities had still the power to appreciate social duty, we appealed to her, by that, to renounce motherhood" (83). The question that begs to be asked, then, is what happens to the women who do not simply agree to this "appeal" for this "appalling sacrifice" (70)? Gilman displaces the violence that is inherent in Somel's statement. Where, in other words, do these "undesirable" women go? They are unseen by the male scientists, and they are unseen by the reader. The didacticism of the novella

implies that if American women realized that they were of the “lower sort,” their noble sacrifice of denying motherhood would be hailed by the women in power. But it merely hints at the violence that will inherently take place if those women do not gracefully accept this sacrifice. The implications are dire.

Herland's and *With Her in Ourland's* use of negative eugenics fictionalized some of the Progressive Era's “mainstream” ideas surrounding population control (Egan 81). The pre-World War II eugenicist ideas in these novellas would have been read, of course, without the viewpoint from which we now read. The inherent violence that comes along with eugenicist rhetoric was not considered as alarming by many because Gilman's works were written before the genocide of Nazi Germany took place. Since eugenicist ideas were harnessed during the atrocities of World War II, they unsurprisingly fell out of popularity (Roberts 89). Gilman's novellas also fell out of popularity for decades. However, as time crept forward after World War II and the Progressive Movement, another means of forcibly controlling the female body came to the forefront: sterilization. As Nadkarni argues, there was a movement from “eugenics to population control...both marry concerns about the maintenance of national stock and of national borders, positing a fundamentally modern understanding of the relationship among biology, science, and the nation-state” (5-6). Eugenics became less popular, but the notion of the female body as tied up in population concerns did not. Rather, sterilization rose in prevalence as a modern iteration of this concern.

Roberts explains that after World War II came a “new, more modern subtle form of social engineering,” that of sterilization (89). Perhaps unsurprisingly, many of the people who were sterilized were done so by doctors without their knowledge and/or consent. Most of the individuals who were sterilized were those considered lower-class and “feeble-minded” as well as people of color, including African Americans, Hispanics, and Native Americans. With regard to African American sterilizations, Roberts explains that the end of Jim Crow allowed African Americans admittance to state hospitals run by white doctors and white staff (89). Many of these institutions routinely sterilized African American patients as another iteration of eugenic action. Just a few years later, by the 1970s, there were more advancements than

ever for birth control and propagation. While the early Progressive Movement promoted the idea of increasing the birth rate of the “old stock” Americans and controlling the birth rates of immigrants and people of color, scientific advancements of the 1970s made it possible for infertile couples with means to reproduce through in vitro fertilization. Again, there was a movement in some quarters to promote more births from those who could afford it with a simultaneous rise in sterilization of those who were considered “unfit” (Kevles 49). Roberts notes that in the 1970s, “sterilization became the most rapidly growing form of birth control in the United States, rising from 200,000 cases in 1970 to over 700,000 in 1980 (90). It is of course important to point out that sterilization was not only used as a form of population control; some people desired to limit their reproduction. But the point is that the rise in the presence of cultural anxiety surrounding the female body and the positioning of who should and who should not procreate echoed the eugenicist sentiments of the Progressive Era.

The 1960s and 1970s brought forth a resurgence of feminism that sparked important reproductive and women’s rights decisions like the 1973 ruling of *Roe v. Wade*. As Rickie Solinger explains, “*Roe v. Wade* generated so much hope and excitement partly because it seemed so clearly to be responding to the dilemma of *all* women. Many proponents of legal abortion believed *Roe* was a symbol and a vehicle of women’s liberation” (4). In other words, *Roe* seemed at first like a way in which the bodies of women might be both separated from the potential of state control and from the potential for hierarchical inequality amongst women. If reproductive rights were distributed more evenly and reproductive medicine became available to women of all socioeconomic classes, perhaps the need for hierarchy within the “sisterhood” of women would dissipate. But *Roe* was met with backlash, mostly in the form of the Religious Right’s idea of “rescuing” the fetuses who feminists and women of “lower class” might abort. The Religious Right led an early crusade against *Roe*. As Randall Balmer puts it: “During the 1980s especially, Religious Right activists sought to portray themselves as the ‘new abolitionists,’ drawing a parallel between their pro-life agenda and the nineteenth-century campaign against slavery” (5). The Religious Right could simultaneously claim slavery-like

oppression and act as “rescuers” by choosing abortion as their cornerstone political issue. And once again, the bodies of women were at the center of this claim.

Herland's 1979 re-release reached a wider audience than did its 1915 iteration. According to Lawrence Wilde, it was received with critical acclaim, especially from Second Wave Feminists involved in recovery efforts who thought that it used skill to “expose the irrationality and hypocrisy of patriarchal thinking and practice” (1). Gilman’s era had brought along social advancements like the New Deal and welfare programs, but these helped white women the most. And like first wave feminism, second wave feminism coincided with a time of much social progress for white women. S.C. Neuman notes that these advancements include improvements in access to “higher education and the professions, in employment equity, in access to legal abortion, and in divorce law” (859). But like the way in which the appropriation of the body of the Other took place alongside—or intermingled with—white feminism of the early twentieth century, this time period brought with it its own types of reproductive control. The sterilization of those deemed “unfit” to be mothers through coercion, the “rescue” of fetuses who were to be aborted, and the adoption of children of the “unfit” show that the bodies of women were again linked with ideas of purity of the nation-state.

Like its reception in its first publication in 1915, Second Wave Feminists found Gilman’s work to be subversive of patriarchal systems. Many critics praised it and once again treated it as a feminist guidebook of sorts. Ann Lane’s 1979 edition of *Herland* met with much critical acclaim, despite the fact that she blatantly, if not dishonestly, excluded Gilman’s eugenicist tendencies (Weinbaum 281-282). Indeed, Weinbaum points out that, “With few exceptions, over the past twenty years, readers of *Herland* have celebrated this utopia as subversive of the most deeply entrenched patriarchal views on women and thus as a prototype for contemporary feminism” (285). Solinger argues, on the other hand, that much of the racism of reproductive rights of the 1960s and 1970s was difficult to see because it was “still buried or too fresh to look at historically” and that had it been seen, this could have “tempered optimism” about reproductive rights as a “powerful equalizer” (6). That said, rather than focusing on the overt appropriation of the marginalized

women in the novella, many of these Second Wave Feminists took the novella as a “blueprint and origin for contemporary feminism.” In doing so, Weinbaum argues, they showed a “failure to analyze the racial politics of feminism that finds its own reflection in Gilman’s work” (286). As we see in the recovery and reception of *Herland*, many activists and writers, while working on behalf of social progress for women, continued to appropriate the female body of the Other.

By the early 1980s, the homogeneity of second wave feminism began to founder. In the late 1970s, the Combahee River Collective of African American feminists released a statement that outlined a desire to form a “separate Black feminist group” (Smith 264-274). On the other hand, what Neuman calls a “backlash” against second wave feminism arose in the fundamentalist, right-wing Moral Majority, mostly because of the taking up of abortion rights as their touchstone issue. Neuman explains that the media called it the “post-feminist’ era” and circulated “badly designed...studies claiming to prove that single career women had high rates of neuroses and unhappiness...that the United States was in the grip of an infertility epidemic...” (860). There is clear tension between the “infertility epidemic” happening just a few years after so many women of color were sterilized. It is easy to see echoes of the fear of “race suicide” in this tension, which again lies in the idea of the desire for more children from women who were “fit” and fewer children from women who were “unfit.” Solinger notes that during the decade after *Roe v. Wade*, there was also an increased emphasis on adoption rather than abortion (32). Adoption allowed those of “higher sort” to “rescue” the unwanted babies of the “lower sort” or the “disqualified mothers.”

Second Wave Feminism and Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Shortly after *Herland* was rediscovered, Margaret Atwood published her 1985 dystopian novel *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The novel, which came on the heels of feminist theory’s recovery movement, was both lauded and criticized. It is clear that Atwood’s contributions to women’s writing was significant even before this novel, her fifth, was published; indeed, she was included in Sandra M. Gilbert’s and Susan Gubar’s 1985

Norton Anthology of Literature by Women (Caras 21). Upon *The Handmaid's Tale's* release, Joyce Johnson wrote in *The Washington Post* that the novel would be labeled a “feminist 1984” and that while she is no “Superwoman,” Offred (the protagonist) represents an “ordinary woman who had taken for granted the freedoms she was to lose...” (“Margaret Atwood’s Brave New World”). Similarly, Gayle Greene’s review at the time argued Offred’s story, while not one of a “freedom fighter,” nevertheless drew power from its ability to disturb the reader (15). Even the harshest early reviews failed to discuss the idea that the novel might be problematic because of its handling of racial and classist hierarchies between women; one of them simply critiqued Atwood’s “lack of imagination” as the novel’s weakness (McCarthy). While the reviews varied, most did have an element in common: the novel was read as a feminist text. Denise Kulp wrote that she could “hardly think of a novel more feminist than this one (21). And a rather critical review acknowledges that the novel is feminist but does not portray Offred as “an independent-minded woman who battles the odds to win her own freedom...” (Slonczewski 123-124). What some of the earliest criticism surrounding the novel missed was the space of saviorhood and victimhood that it allowed the white, progressive reader to embody.

The Handmaid's Tale is the story of a gloom-filled future in which most women have lost the ability to conceive children due to environmental pollution. In a coup, a Christian fundamentalist sect overtakes the United States government by killing the president and all members of Congress. In power, they kidnap and enslave women who have had children (since they have tangible proof of fertility) and force them to serve as handmaids for the prominent male leaders who have barren wives. *The Handmaid's Tale* is told through the point of view of the main character, Offred, a handmaid to the Commander and his wife, Serena Joy. Offred has been stripped of her own child by her oppressors and is forced into intercourse with the Commander in hopes of conceiving and bearing a healthy child for the State. *The Handmaid's Tale* explicitly critiques some aspects of white feminism in that it demonstrates the complicity of the women in power over the women of the “lower sort.” While the novel positions itself as a dystopia that invokes fear in the reader because of its critique of society, it also allows a similar space for white feminism that does *Herland*. The white, middle-class

reader of *The Handmaid's Tale* can identify with the white protagonist, Offred, who is victimized by the Gileadean power structure. At the same time, the novel allows space for the the pleasure of female solidarity, despite its white-washing of race and class.

Atwood's novel has more recently been criticized for its lack of characters who are women of color. Ben Merriman argues that Atwood's use of female victimization largely ignores the idea that "sexism in America has, generally, been modulated by forms of race and class oppression, nor does she acknowledge the parallels between her own story and the experience of Black slavery" ("White-washing Oppression in Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale*"). By placing Gilead in the northeastern United States, Atwood argues that the United States is the place that is at risk for this dystopian near-future. To use sexism and the oppression of women as a major aspect of the plot that relies on an understanding of American history without acknowledging the roots in American slavery's treatment of women in particular is problematic. That said, the white, middle class female reader of the novel stands to gain an experience of solidarity with Offred, especially if the people of color in the novel are displaced.

Similarly, Danita J. Dodson situates Offred's story against Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. Rather than ignoring the parallels to American slavery, Dodson argues that Atwood implies that Offred's story is inspired by stories like Jacobs's. She notes that "It is true that Offred is a white woman in forced servitude, but her decision to make ongoing references to the black woman's slave narrative signals her recognition that women of color have endured for centuries." She has become aware of "her own compliant role in a domestic imperialism that ultimately turns women against women" (72). In other words, Offred awakens to the role that she previously inhabited as a white, middle class woman who turned away from the suffering and oppression of other women. Through Offred's awakening of sorts, she offers the white, middle class reader the space to feel both victimized and awakened themselves. The fact that women act as oppressors in the novel gives space for both treachery and solidarity between women.

The women of Gilead are most controlled by the act of observation. The handmaids are consistently watched by a Secret Service of sorts, a group known as the “Eyes.” The entire plot is overwhelmed by a sense of anxiety and claustrophobia due to the ever-present but unseen Eyes. While this certainly serves as a means of objectification and control by the men of Gilead, the society is set up in a way that allows for women to control other women through this watchfulness. The handmaids are often unsure about who of the other handmaids they can or cannot trust. For example, they are forced to speak in coded language in an assumption that if the code is unknown, the handmaid to whom it is spoken is not to be trusted. Early in the novel, Ofglen, Offred’s shopping partner, remarks, “It’s a beautiful May day” (Atwood 43). Offred recognizes the word as a “distress signal” but misses Ofglen’s coded message within. The attempts at solidarity are missed by Offred until she is made aware of the underground network. She is still “blinded” both literally by the “wings” that she wears and metaphorically by her unfamiliarity with the feeling of victimization.

Another sense in which the lack of sight is invoked takes place through the hiding of the undesired in Gilead. In a comment that reads like a critique of Gilman’s convenient displacement of the Other in *Herland*, Atwood’s Gilead also displaces the body of the Other, though here it includes older women, LGBTQ+ people, and people of color. Instead of hiding them from complete sight of the reader à la Gilman, Atwood places this group of people in work camps, known as the “Colonies.” The Colonies are still outside of the main setting of the novel, but their physical displacement is tempered by their harrowing description. Moira, Offred’s friend from before the rise of the fundamentalist sect describes them:

It’s old women—I bet you’ve been wondering why you haven’t seen too many of those around anymore—and Handmaids who’ve screwed up their three chances, and incorrigibles like me.

Discards, all of us. They’re sterile, of course. If they aren’t that way to begin with, they are after they’ve been there for a while. When they’re unsure, they do a little operation on you, so there won’t be any mistakes. (248)

Moira explains that those who are unfit to procreate are sterilized, and we note that this sterilization happens even during the midst of extreme anxiety surrounding the ability of females in Gilead to reproduce. This reads as a critique of the hypocrisy of the anxiety surrounding the “infertility epidemic” of the late 1970s and 1980s and the thousands of women of color who, at the same time, were sterilized without consent and/or knowledge. It is of note that the Colonies are so named. In the Progressive Era, especially during the wave of eugenicist thought, many “colonies” for people with physical and mental disabilities were established across the country. These institutions, literally called “colonies” were places where those considered unfit for normative social life were segregated from the rest of the populace. Thousands of these people were labeled as “feebleminded” and sterilized to ensure their inability to procreate (Lombardo 13). In *The Handmaid's Tale*, the reader is forced to acknowledge the horrors of these physical spaces and the role that mainstream progressivism played in their creation and maintenance. For the reader, this idea is especially poignant to note because of the fact that Serena Joy, a woman, is the main architect behind Gilead.

Indeed, Serena Joy's construction of and involvement in Gilead is perhaps the most overt acknowledgment of the ways in which some women benefit from the oppression and exploitation of others. Early in the novel, Offred describes Serena Joy as a right wing activist who delivered speeches about “the sanctity of the home, about how women should stay home” (Atwood 45). Serena Joy is therefore partly to blame for the power structures of Gilead, though Offred points out the irony of her position of power: “She doesn't make speeches anymore. She has become speechless. She stays in her home, but it doesn't seem to agree with her. How furious she must be, now that she's been taken at her word” (46). While Serena Joy acts as a figure who exploits lower class women, she remains exploited by the patriarchal regime. In other words, she holds up the regime's power structure to maintain her own place of power within it. As Madonne Miller points out, the connection of these two women is shown through the visual of the color red. She argues that the red of Serena Joy's tulips comes from “the blood of other women that allows Serena that time to

cultivate...for some women to enjoy the freedom of playing with red flowers, other women must wear the red of handmaids” (151-152).

While the bodies of most women in Gilead have been harmed by the polluted physical environment of “chemicals, rays, radiation” that “creep into your body, camp out in your fatty cells,” only some are required to become handmaids (112). Of course, these women are chosen foremost because of their proven ability to procreate, but their past “sins” serve as a way to “other” the lower and middle class white women who are forced into this role. Offred, for example, had committed adultery with her husband, Luke, and so she was an ideal candidate for a handmaid—she had a proven record for childbearing abilities, and she “deserved” punishment. Offred’s affair with a married man hints at her own disregard for the feelings of the “other woman”—Luke’s wife. While she maintained the “power” in that triangle, the power dynamics shift once again when she becomes a handmaid. In a symbolic gesture, the handmaids must bathe as part of the ritual before the “Ceremony,” or the night in which the Commander and his wife rape Offred each month. Offred explains that the bathing is in response to the fear of “crotch rot” or uncleanness (63). But the bathing also metaphorically cleanses the bodies of the handmaids before potential pregnancy. In this pseudo-baptism ritual, the “sins” of the lower class, Othered handmaids are washed away before they couple with their oppressors. While Offred bathes before the Ceremony, she flashes back to memories of bathing her daughter: “I step into the water, lie down, let it hold me...I close my eyes, and she’s there with me, suddenly, without warning, it must be the smell of the soap” (63). The cleanliness of her body, then, is connected to motherhood.

While the smell of soap invokes memories of Offred’s daughter, the smell of flowers invokes the power that Serena Joy wields over her. During the rape scene in particular, Serena Joy literally holds down Offred’s limbs while her husband rapes her, arguably the ultimate act of complicity. And during this, Offred smells Serena Joy’s floral perfume: “A mist of Lily of the Valley surrounds us, chilly, crisp almost” (93). The invocation of flowers while Serena Joy literally controls Offred’s body during rape mirrors the control that

Serena Joy has over her garden. Offred explains that “The garden is the domain of the Commander’s Wife. Looking out through my shatterproof window I’ve often seen her in it, her knees on a cushion, a light blue veil thrown over her wide gardening hat, a basket at her side with shears in it and pieces of string for tying the flowers into place...” (12). The floral scent of Serena Joy’s perfume (which is connected with her control of her garden) surrounds Offred in a symbol of the control that Serena Joy exerts over her body. Indeed, Offred’s body is trapped by Serena Joy during the rape and trapped behind her “shatterproof window” while Serena Joy controls the blooming life within her garden.

Serena Joy’s barren body is visibly moved by the fertility of the flowers in her garden, which are surely symbolic of the body of Offred. Offred describes Serena Joy as “snipping the seedpods with a pair of shears...She was aiming, positioning the shears, then cutting with a convulsive jerk of the hands. Was it...some kamikaze, committed on the swelling genitalia of the flowers? The fruiting body. To cut off the seedpods is supposed to make the bulb store energy” (153). With Serena Joy’s pruning of these flowers, there is a gesture towards an attack on the fertility of Offred—the literal “fruiting body.” Yet, here, the control is subverted by the fruiting body itself; the violent attack on the “seedpods” actually allow the plant to “store energy.” Indeed, Offred uses sexual energy expressed through her body to rebel against the hierarchical system in which Serena Joy has helped place it. The Commander requires her to have an affair with him, but Offred still derives pleasure from the shift in power dynamics that this causes between Serena Joy and her. She explains: “I now had a power over her, of a kind, although she didn’t know it. And I enjoyed that. Why pretend? I enjoyed it a lot” (162). In a sense, Offred subverts her own rape by the using the Commander’s body as a power play against Serena Joy. While she is still obviously victimized, she derives pleasure in the small sense of power that this provides.

The handmaids do indeed have a semblance of power on a larger level in Gilead because of their ability to conceive. This is represented again through the language of the garden:

There is something subversive about this garden of Serena Joy’s, a sense of buried things bursting

upwards, wordlessly, into the light, as if to point, to say: Whatever is silenced will clamour to be heard, though silently...Light pours down upon it from the sun, true, but heat also rises, from the flowers themselves, you can feel it: like holding your hand an inch above an arm, a shoulder. It breathes, in the warmth, breathing itself in. (153)

The flowers again are physically likened to the fertile body of the handmaids. The petals become an “arm” and a “shoulder,” filled with heat and life. It is impossible here for Serena Joy to control the flowers, and this spreads to the impossibility of controlling the female form. And the bodies of the handmaids themselves are the bodies with power; though the whole of Gileadean society attempts to control them, they are powerful in the sense that they have what others desperately want—fertility and the ability to control the continuation of the race. But the sense that the flowers literally become the women also emphasizes the violence of their cultivation by other women; Serena Joy’s garden shears and scissors seem to cut real human skin. The women, like the flowers, are at once hailed and victimized.

Jane Armbruster breaks down the intricacies of the means in which women in Gilead control one another:

‘Wives’ of commanders recruit handmaids into their households. ‘Aunts’ train the handmaids, organize their placement into commanders’ households, and monitor the compliance of wives and handmaids with their prescribed roles. ‘Marthas,’ the housekeepers, have access to information that gives them some leverage over handmaids and wives. ‘Econowives,’ spouses of lower-class Caucasian men, are used by aunts as examples of inferiority in handmaid training. All women fear the fate of becoming unwomen. (147)

The hierarchical breakdown demonstrates that without the complicity of other women, the Gileadean patriarchy would not maintain power. And the women who seem to truly believe in the good of Gilead are the most dangerous. Aunt Lydia, for example, tells the handmaids: “What we’re aiming for...is a spirit of camaraderie among women. We must all pull together” (Atwood 222). The juxtaposition between the women

who are “all in” like Serena Joy and Aunt Lydia against the oppressed like Offred allow space for Offred to derive pleasure from her own awakening. Before she can awaken, Offred must become aware of her own role in the patriarchal system. Allan Weiss describes Offred’s confession of her own complicity in the system that now oppresses her: “...before the installation of the Gilead regime she was very complacent. It is easy for the fundamentalists to take away her freedoms because she never truly valued them, let alone sought to defend them...She prefers freedom from pain and acceptance of comfortable paternalistic domination over dangerous political commitment” (19-26). But with her confession, Offred (and the white, middle class readers who identify with her) can derive pleasure from the oppression in that they are now part of the “in group” who experience this oppression regularly. They also gain pleasure from the ability to group together in solidarity against women like Aunt Lydia and Serena Joy.

The feeling of solidarity that the handmaids find subverts the means of control that the regime seeks to continue. Armbruster argues that the control relies upon “suppression and manipulation of human feelings. With feelings denied, Gileadeans have no experience of knowing they belong in a human community...they can spy on one another, limit their sexuality to procreation, hate and collaborate in persecuting ‘gender traitors’ and people of color, surrender their children and their souls to the state” (148). This stripping of feelings creates “people without conscience, numb to their shared humanity and without the spirit to resist their own repression” (148). The removal of emotion causes the female body to become a pseudo-vessel, a non-human. Susan Bordo writes that when women become pregnant, the State treats the body of the mother less as human and more as object (79). In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, this objectification leads to the disconcerting transcorporeality between bodies of women. The handmaid’s reproductive organs stand in for the wife’s during the Ceremony. Similarly, when handmaids give birth, the wives enact the birth as well. The handmaids who witness childbirth are also affected: “It’s coming, it’s coming, like a bugle, a call to arms, like a wall falling, we can feel it like a heavy stone moving down, pulled down inside us, we think we will burst. We grip each other’s hands, we are no longer single” (Atwood 125). The women, through childbirth,

lose their own individuality—they are “no longer single.” Their bodies have become so intricately tied to reproduction and cultivation for the State that they are no longer single bodies themselves. Interestingly, however, this communal feeling might also be read as a way for the handmaids to rebel against the oppressive society in which they live. The bleeding of one body into another has the potential to create a unified, more powerful, being.

2017 Hulu Adaptation of *The Handmaid's Tale*

In January 2017, the Women’s March on Washington took place, which directly criticized Donald Trump’s sexist and racist rhetoric while calling for women’s rights, reproductive rights, immigration rights, disability rights, and more. Some participants in the March carried signs that read “Make Margaret Atwood Fiction Again” or dressed for the marches and protests in the garb of the handmaids. A few months later, Atwood released a new edition of her 1985 novel. It had, of course, become relevant once again in the wake of continued and overt attacks on female reproduction. Though the March took place in the contemporary moment, the issues at its center have been argued about for hundreds of years. As Atwood notes in the introduction to the new edition of her novel, each idea in *The Handmaid's Tale* is based on historical events from all over the world. She notes: “[Women] are not an afterthought of nature, they are not secondary players in human destiny, and every society has always known that...The control of women...has been a feature of every repressive regime on the planet...Of those promoting enforced childbirth, it should be asked: Cui bono? Who profits by it? Sometimes this sector, sometimes that. Never no one” (xvii). The Hulu adaptation of the novel grapples with this very question and comes to the conclusion that women are often the ones who profit by maintenance of the patriarchal standard.

Atwood’s 1985 critique remains true today, albeit with a different set of circumstances surrounding reproduction. Instead of overt coerced sterilization or sterilization without consent, women of color and women of lower socioeconomic standing face the modern-day iteration of these issues. For example, Laura

Briggs explains that “In recent years, public health researchers have suggested racism as a primary cause of inflated infant mortality rates, sharply raising the questions of whether the ways racism was lived and embodied was intensified after 1980” (105-106). Instead of primarily overt, outward discrimination *on* bodies of color, the oppression manifests itself *within* and is shown through the racial and socioeconomic discrepancies in reproductive rights. Briggs argues that “This infertility is induced by the labor market—and the toxic health by-products of racial and other inequalities...” (112). Instead of Atwood’s imagined toxic physical environment, women in a contemporary context suffer from “toxic inequalities.” Harkening back to the eugenics of Gilman’s time and the sterilizations of Atwood’s, the discrepancies in the women who are considered “fit” and “unfit” to be mothers remain. Briggs also argues that Assisted Reproductive Technologies (ARTs) are “haunted” by eugenics: “ARTs primarily serve to enable the reproduction of a largely (though not exclusively) white professional class—the very group that eugenicists in the early twentieth century worried were not having enough offspring” (108). She argues that the foster care and adoption system is often still used as a means of punishment for being poor or being a person of color; in a move that echoes that of *The Handmaid’s Tale*, children are taken from their “usually racially minoritized mothers to whiter and wealthier ones” (105).

The first scene of the television adaptation of the novel opens with the taking of a child away from a mother. This scene invokes the modern-day anxiety surrounding reproduction and fear over the potential loss of women’s rights under the ultra-conservative Trump administration. Significantly, the woman who loses her child in the first scene of the show is middle class and white. The whiteness of Offred is in keeping with Atwood’s book version, where all African American people are shipped to the Colonies (Atwood 83). While the book is potentially whitewashed as a critique of racism, the television show is not. The character of Moira is played by the African American actor Samira Wiley, Offred’s husband is African American (played by O.T. Fagbenle) and the two have a biracial daughter, and the cook in the Commander’s house is biracial (played by Amanda Brugel). Like the novel, the show has come under much criticism about its handling of race

(Hendershot). While this criticism is merited, the show's interpretation of race can also be read as another, much more subtle, critique of racial hierarchies. In the contemporary United States, wealthy white families often hire women of color to perform domestic labor for them (Briggs 94). The fact that the housekeeper in the television version is biracial and is hierarchically categorized through her clothing and her station reads as a critique of the exploitation of these workers. While Offred is white, she is married to an African American man named Luke. The interracial marriage might also be read as a "sin" that has helped cause Offred's captivity. That, too, can be read as a distinct comment on contemporary racism. But Offred's class status and whiteness are significant factors that asks for the white, middle class, female viewer to relate to her struggles in Gilead.

Indeed, the show's appeal, despite its release into a social environment in which many are suffering because of political decisions from the current administration, is widespread. Offred's character in the television version offers an endearing space for liberal white women viewers: the audience watches her become "woke" and subvert the oppressive patriarchal regime in which she is forced to reside. As Angelica Bastián notes, it is powerful for white women to identify with a character who becomes slowly aware of the ways in which other groups have been oppressed ("Why the Female Villains on *The Handmaid's Tale* are so Terrifying"). If white women viewers identify with Offred, perhaps they see themselves becoming "woke" and draw pleasure from the experience of "understanding" the oppression that Offred faces. In the television version, Moira is an African American radical feminist. Stillman and Johnson note that "If Offred is an everywoman, Moira is her opposite. She is an exception, an outsider, a rebel, a maverick...Because of her feminist consciousness and activity, Moira, unlike Offred, was aware of—almost prepared for—the nightmarish possibility of Gilead" (79). What does it say that Moira, instead of being a white feminist as she is portrayed in the novel, is portrayed by an African American actress in 2017? The show seems to hint that her position as a woman of color means that she already understands the experience of oppression, while Offred must experience oppression herself in order to be inspired enough to take action against the regime. In other

words, it takes Offred's own oppression to notice that of others. And this oppression is what ultimately draws her to action.

The show also (albeit quite subtly) brings up the issue of class. As Heather Hendershot explains, one of the handmaids at first seems "villainous" and "complicit with the power elite. But then she explains that she's never had it so good: she's got food and shelter, a relatively easy life...Her dystopia was enacted in the past, back when things were 'normal.' If you'd been living a comfortable middle class life before the new regime came into power, Gilead is a nightmare. If you were living on the streets, it might be a paradise" ("*The Handmaid's Tale* as Utopian Allegory: 'Stars and Stripes Forever, Baby'"). This moment, while brief, is poignant. The audience is forced to grapple with the fact that Offred comes from a place of relative privilege, and so it offers the viewer another opportunity to awaken to their own places of privilege or lack thereof. But it also offers the viewer a chance to feel a bit "above" this handmaid. After all, the insinuation is that if her own standing was so low before Gilead came to power, the audience would likely identify with the other handmaids of a class "above." While class is not explicitly discussed often during the series, the color-coded clothing, the terrible treatment of the handmaids, and the wielding of power by some women over others show quite pointedly the place of class hierarchy of women in Gilead. Indeed, it is really the entire basis upon which the regime stands. The fact that the class hierarchies between women allow for the violent, oppressive patriarchy to continue is no accident.

During the second episode of the first season of the show, Offred and her shopping partner, Ofglen, riskily begin to trust one another and discuss the oppression of Gilead. As they walk together after shopping, Ofglen gives Offred her first chance at subversive action: "'You can join us.' 'What do you mean, us?' 'There's a network.' 'I don't know. I'm not that kind of person.' 'No one is until they have to be'" ("*Birth Day*" 0:5:57). Offred comments that she is not the kind of person who subverts authority and oppression; her status as a middle class white woman has not before called her to action. But here, she is forced into the role of oppressed, so she will ultimately decide to become a rebel. Again, for the middle class white woman viewer

who relates to Offred and who is discouraged by contemporary actions and legislations, the call to action could not be more clear. A major difference between the show and the novel that ties into this is the fact that Offred reclaims her former name in the television show. The handmaids are given names based on the male official to which they belong (i.e., “Of Fred”); this renaming based on pseudo-ownership is another way in which the women are dehumanized and categorized. Throughout the novel, the main character does not claim her original name directly, while in the television show, she reclaims her name—in a sense, her identity—by the end of the first episode. Rather than watching Offred become despondent, the audience derives pleasure from watching her reclaim her own being and her own autonomy when she states, “I intend to survive...my name is June” (“Offred” 0:55:50). The claiming of her real name is tied in with the call to action: her true identity is established, and she will rebel.

In contrast to the novel version of *The Handmaid's Tale*, the television show offers a more pointed critique on the complicity of other women, specifically white women, in the patriarchal regime. While many of the differences between the novel and the television show are invisible to viewers unfamiliar with the book, the changes that are made are nevertheless significant. The complicit women harken back to Gilman's characters who believed themselves entitled to take children away from “unfit” mothers. Since all of the women on the show are involved in a system in which men have the most power, many of the women find the power they can and use it. Bastián writes that it is this use of power at the expense of other women that makes the show so terrifying. She writes that “...it's Aunt Lydia's obsession with the sort of power Commanders freely have access to that brings to mind how real-life women have historically used their place in America's hierarchies of power to brutalize those below them” (“Why the Female Villains on *The Handmaid's Tale* are so Terrifying”). This is especially poignant with regard to the women who contemporary audiences see as holding up an oppressive regime in a contemporary context. She continues: “*The Handmaid's Tale* is at its most potent when it interrogates the ways women participate in systems that exploit them...characters like Aunt Lydia and Serena Joy feel like the heightened analogues of real-life conservative

women like Ivanka Trump and Kellyanne Conway, who are all too content to watch the world burn if it means consolidating their own power” (“Why the Female Villains on *The Handmaid's Tale* are so Terrifying”). Indeed, in a society where many women are anxious about the potential revocation of reproductive rights, watching June subvert the women who are oppressing her is quite a pleasing sight.

This subversion happens in large and small ways throughout the entirety of the show. Perhaps one of the most poignant ways ties again into the notion of watchfulness. Like in the book, the Eyes watch the women in Gilead, but the other pairs of watchful eyes are those of other women. As Hendershot notes, even the perceived socialization of the handmaids is not as it seems. The women, rather than becoming friends, are meant to spy upon one another. She notes that “Companions are not for companionship but, rather, to make one feel under surveillance: the system works by making women fear other women” (“*The Handmaid's Tale* as Utopian Allegory: ‘Stars and Stripes Forever, Baby’”). And this works; many handmaids stay the course without attempts at subversion. But the audience watches June use this system to become involved with the rebellious network, which she learns about through Ofglen. Rather than abiding by the rules of the regime, she thwarts authority and attempts to gain freedom because she risks an allegiance with other women like her. Many of the handmaids ultimately band together and draw upon each other for strength to survive the violence and atrocities. In one of the most visually striking scenes of the first season, four handmaids (including June and Ofglen) sit together on the wall chatting innocuously about the weather. This takes place while a man is being hanged on the wall beside them (“Birth Day” 0:3:00). It shows, of course, the atrocities of the regime and the fear inherent in the normalization of violence. But it also shows that the women draw upon each other for survival. They are living, surviving, huddled together in a group of blood red and white, next to the starkness of death beside them.

Perhaps this coming together of women despite race, class, or sexual orientation under an oppressive regime, which is not nearly as pronounced in the novel, is nostalgic for a time less fractured, though arguably there is not one. Audiences view scene after scene where women’s bodies are violated and mutilated, and

moments where the handmaids turn on one another through betrayal or violence. But during a poignant scene at the end of the first season, the handmaids refuse to comply with the oppression brought on by other women. They rebel when Aunt Lydia orders them to stone one of the other handmaids—one of their own. They drop their rocks, walk away, and the viewer is left with the knowledge that if the women band together, not apart, they could potentially wield their own power or nobly sacrifice themselves for their sisterhood (“Night” 0:50:00). The ending offers a space for all—for those just becoming “woke,” for allies, for women of color, for women of all classes—to come together, despite the complicity from and oppression by other women who are more concerned with power than solidarity. The feeling of “sisterhood” and the acts of rebellion against an oppressive regime are pleasurable for the audience to witness. *The Handmaid’s Tale* offers a space where women prevail despite atrocious difficulties, difficulties which include the oppression by other women. There is a rallying cry and a strength found in rebellion that would not be there without the oppression they face—the solidarity of the Women’s March, the women who protested the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court—the oppression turned on its head causes a mobilizing, affective response. Or, as June puts it: “Now there has to be an us, because now, there is a them” (“Offred” 0:7:16).

Conclusion

Many of Gilman’s ideas involved the feminist notion of creating a nation in which women had more inherent power, and she believed that power came from the female ability to create and cultivate children who would become the “pure” populace. If that is true, Atwood argues, then who will control the bodies who become “soldiers” for the state? The patriarchy, of course, but the women with more power will carry out the bidding. Aunt Lydia’s words eerily echo some of Gilman’s most famous messages:

For the generations that come after...it will be so much better. The women will live in harmony together, all in one family; you will be like daughters to them, and when the population level is up to scratch again we’ll no longer have to transfer you from one house to another because there will be

enough to go round. There can be bonds of real affection...under such conditions. Women united for a common end! (Atwood 163)

This *Herland*-esque utopian view ignores the eugenic oppression involved in this scheme. Even the Commander notes that “Better never means better for everyone...it always means worse, for some” (211). Indeed, sometimes those who profit from the appropriation of the bodies of women and the forced cultivation of a “pure” nation-state are the most unlikely—women themselves. But progressive women, too, can derive pleasure from the space that these texts open up. The notion of female solidarity is arguably another means by which white women benefit from awakening to the oppression of the Other.

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